

Chapter Ten

Ordeal In The Desert: The Muddy Mission

As early as 1855 Mormon explorers under the leadership of Ira Hatch had investigated the lead deposits at Potosi located near Las Vegas Springs and had camped on Muddy Creek, a fork of the Virgin River which drained the high desert country west of St. George and north of Boulder Canyon on the Colorado River. They never tarried long however, for Indians were unfriendly and temperatures soared to 120 degrees and higher. It was a harsh desert place, hotter than hades in the summer and bitterly cold during the winter, and the wind never quit blowing clouds of fine sand no matter what the season.

Hatch had been instructed to watch for places which could be colonized, but he reported that favorable places along the Muddy were scarce, there being only three narrow valleys several miles in length and a mile or two wide. It would be difficult to get water onto the desert sand, and what little water there was contained so much alkali they couldn't drink it. There was no timber closer than 60 miles and it was terribly isolated, 100 miles across a hellish country to the village of St. George and more than 500 miles from Salt Lake City. Brigham Young decided against settlement

then, but he never forgot the Muddy entirely.

With the Utah War over, ever more gentiles were coming into Utah, attracted mostly by business opportunities and mining. And every few years Congress whittled a little more off western Utah to enrich and enlarge Nevada. Rich silver strikes were being made at Panaca, Pioche and Hiko, all right at St. George's doorstep and all attracting an ever growing rush of wild-eyed gentile miners to the desert country. Brigham Young believed that if the Saints could settle in every valley and lay claim to every spring and water hole, and even locate mineral ledges before the miners did, he could build a buffer zone between the Saints and the miners, and secure the entire region as part of the Utah Territory.

But there were other reasons for settling the Muddy. A line of settlements would be links in a chain connecting St. George with Callville, a Mormon outpost on the Colorado River, and with Las Vegas Springs and the Mormon colony at San Bernidino in California. Such a "Mormon Corridor" would provide a route for Saints traveling to Zion from the Pacific coast. Also, cotton grew well at St. George so it was reasoned that it would grow equally as well along the Muddy, which was even lower in elevation with an even warmer climate. Besides, there were Piute and Shivwits Indians there, Lamanites with souls to be saved. But the main reason for a mission to the Muddy would be to create a partition, a buffer zone to separate the Saints of southern Utah from the wild and wicked mining camps in Nevada.

Callville on the Colorado, named for Joseph's friend of Nauvoo days, Anson Call, was the first link in the chain of settlements

along the "Mormon Corridor". In December, 1864 Call chose a site on the Colorado and by the following spring he had a 50' x 100' stone warehouse built at what he believed was the head of navigable water on the wild river. Brigham Young acquired two steamships, the Esmeralda and the Nina Tilden, and they began hauling supplies from the Gulf of California to Callville, but only at enormous cost and great risk to life. The scheme was never practical, for a wagon road had to be built from Callville to St. George and on to Salt Lake City, at that time an almost impossible task. Time would prove that all the labor expended at Callville would be for naught, for in only a few years the trans-continental railroad would be completed, bringing supplies to Zion at a fraction of the cost of shipping them by steamship to Callville and from there by wagon to Salt Lake City.

On January 8th, 1865 a small party of only 11 men and 3 women led by Thomas Smith of Davis County was sent to the Muddy to locate possible townsites. Smith was no more impressed than Ira Hatch had been ten years earlier, but he reported that it might be possible to establish a settlement at the junction of the Muddy and Virgin rivers. The hopeful settlers named the site St. Thomas in honor of their leader. On March 2nd, 1865 Brigham Young sent 45 families to settle St. Thomas, where they were soon busy grubbing sagebrush and mesquite from the parched alkali soil. In dispatching the new settlers, Brigham Young said, "We are desirous of having every eligible place on the Muddy taken up so as to prevent stragglers who are drifting around that country from securing land."⁽¹⁾ He left no doubt in anyone's

mind that those stragglers were Nevada miners!

Those first settlers sent to the Muddy were appalled at what they found. It seemed hopeless to try to build homes in such a forlorn place, and before the first summer was ended many gave up in despair and abandoned the mission. Warren Foote wrote to his wife, "The entire country is bare of any kind of vegetation, although beds of prickly pear grow in the sand and there is a giant cactus which grows as high as eight feet. Everything that grows has a thorn on it, and there are lizards in abundance!"⁽²⁾ Everyone who saw it said the Muddy was a God forsaken place, and even the Deseret News, spokesman for the church reported, "The Muddy is some sort of purgatory, a place of punishment!"⁽³⁾

Nowhere in the west was colonization as difficult as it was on the Muddy, but Young was adamant that the area had to be secured and in June he sent a second group of 40 families to establish a townsite 12 miles upstream from St. Thomas. The new settlement was named St. Joseph for the parties leader, Joseph Foote. Sections of land along the creek were only large enough to support a small settlement at each location, so several families from St. Joseph moved three miles downstream to where they started a little hamlet named Simonsville, but sometimes called Mill Point because of the grist mill they built there.

Life at all three villages was rugged at best. Hard dug irrigation ditches filled with drifting sand and had to be dug out after every wind, and the wind blew every day. Few could drink the creek water without becoming sick, and for many it made their mouths sore with

canker. Grasshoppers came in hordes and devoured every blade of grass or green shoot as soon as they appeared in the sandy soil. And the heat was terrible, with temperatures well over 100 degrees nearly every day. Abraham Kimball wrote, "We are unable to sleep in the cabin because of the heat, so we are compelled to resort to the sheds and try to sleep on top of them, to keep away from scorpions, tarantulas and rattlesnakes, but there is no escaping the mosquitos!"(4)

Many of those sent to the Muddy could not stand the hardships. Some died of malaria and dysentery, while others simply wasted away from the scorching heat and hard work on a starvation diet. Some stayed only long enough to rest their teams so they could leave, while others tried to grow crops only to become too discouraged to try again and they left also. The harsh land couldn't support the large number of people sent. Thomas Smith wrote to Brigham Young that any new settlers sent should "bring plenty of shoes and shovels, spades and ploughs and homemade goods. It is our hope that all who are sent here will come with plenty of provisions!"(5)

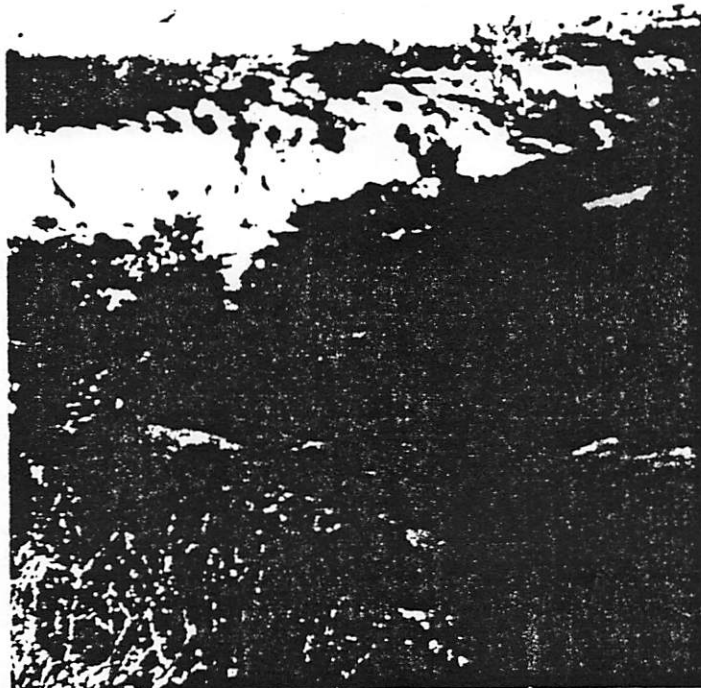
Just as Joseph expected, on October 8th, 1867 he was "called" to go to the Muddy. The names of 158 families were read out at conference, his among them. He was formally relieved as Bishop and Mission President of the Provo Valley Mission and was succeeded by Abraham Hatch. Brigham Young was determined to make the Muddy Mission succeed, so all who were called to serve were the most dependable and experienced pioneers and colonizers he could find. Listed among those chosen were such stalwarts as Israel Barlow, Edward Woolley, Scipio Kenner, Miles Romney, Heleman Pratt, Joseph Asay and Wilford Woodruff

Jr. Joseph was honored to be counted among such men, for he knew that although the road ahead might be hard, he would be among men who wouldn't give up easily.

He had talked to others who had passed through the Muddy Creek country, and from them he had learned that he couldn't expect to feed or take care of his large family there, so he had to make the heart breaking decision of who was to go and who had to remain behind. It was decided that Elizibeth and Pernetta with their children would go, while Eliza and Jane and their families would remain at Heber City. Jane had two small children to care for, Stanley Gibson, born July 11th, 1865 and Margaret Ellen, born only that spring, on April 11th, 1867, so Joseph felt she was not strong enough to go. Eunice would also remain behind, at her home at American Fork. Elizibeth was still young and strong, while Joseph believed that Pernetta be of great value in meetings with the Indians.

It was a busy time getting ready for the long trip to "Dixie". Wagons had to be repaired and ox yokes and harnesses given last minute checks. Everything taken had to be a necessity, for they had no room for luxuries. Joseph loaded shovels, ploughs and other tools while the women packed boxes and barrels with enough food for the journey and hopefully a little extra to last until a crop could be harvested. Everything needed for several years had to be taken for there was no place along the way or at their destination where stocks could be replenished. Finally the day came when everything was loaded and they were ready to venture into the unknown.

The Murdock's little wagon train made its way down Provo Canyon to American Fork where a hasty farewell was said to Eunice before



Muddy Creek, where Joseph Murdock and his family spent three long years while on the Muddy Mission

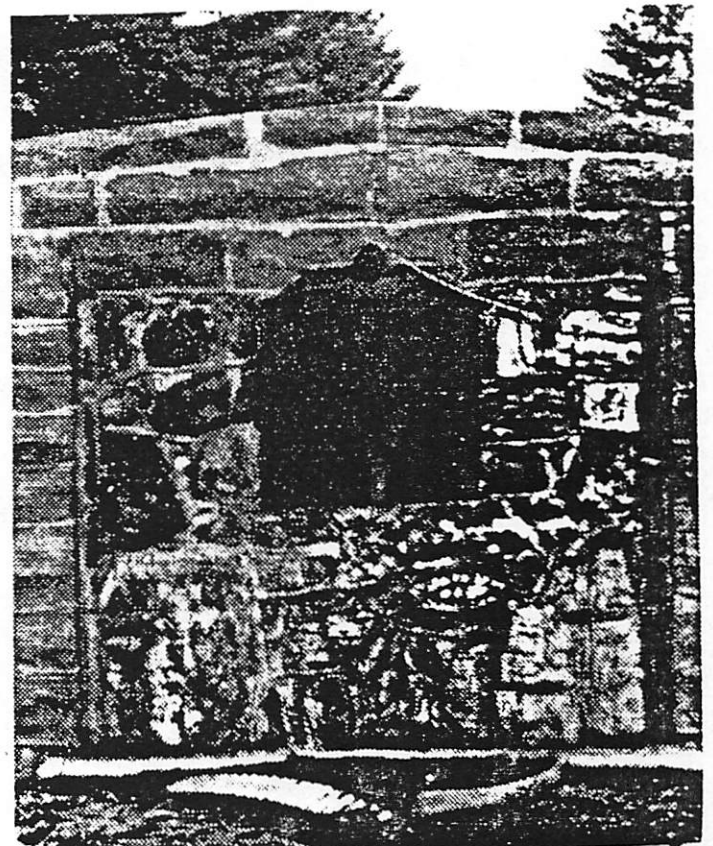
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Chief Tabby

He signed a peace treaty with Joseph Murdock to end the Black Hawk War

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Monument on the Courthouse grounds at Heber City, commemorating the Black Hawk War peace treaty signed by Joseph Murdock (Author)

moving on across Utah Valley and over the Santaquin Hill. It took all of the next day just to cross the desolate York Valley to Salt Creek and Nephi, then only an outpost at the edge of the wilderness. It took nearly a week more to reach Fillmore. Joseph's sister Betsy operated a stage station and hotel of sorts near there, but although they hadn't visited each other for some time, the travelers spent only a short while to renew family ties before moving on.

After their brief rest at Fillmore they continued on to Hamilton Fort. By then all were seasoned travelers and had their own chores to do. Pilt and Alva drove their small band of sheep and milch cows while the younger children watched over those even smaller than they were. They rested for a day at the Washington Field and then passed through St. George and Santa Clara to follow the narrow, twisting and dangerous canyon of the Virgin River, which they had to ford 38 times! At one treacherous crossing a mule slipped into a deep hole and was drowned, a serious loss they couldn't afford. The trail then crossed the desolate Beaver Dam Wash, a parched, sandy wasteland that even the Indians avoided. After a difficult month long trip, it was a tired, worn out and battered little wagon train that finally arrived at St. Thomas on the Muddy.

The country was even worse than Joseph had anticipated, but they couldn't stop to rest, for the location which had been chosen for them to settle was far upstream near the California Crossing, a place rejected by earlier arrivals as not worth claiming. Even the Indians avoided it, for their name for it was "podunk", "a poor place"! It wasn't much, but Joseph had been called to make his home there and

build a settlement on the Muddy, and that was exactly what he intended to do.

Elizibeth and Pernetta with their smallest children lived in the wagons while a crude dugout became home for Joseph and the older boys. Pilt and Alva herded the families sheep, moving them continually to find the sparse feed that grew among the cactus and rocks, and always keeping an eye open for Indians. What little food they had left after their long journey from Heber City seemed to be coarse and tasteless when cooked with Muddy Creek water over an open fire, where sand and dust settled into everything. Pernetta's knowledge of which roots and cactus could be eaten and where berries could be found helped them survive that first hard year. In later years Joseph said, "We had a very rough time there!", certainly an understatement from a man whose entire life was rough.⁽⁶⁾

Slowly they built a new home in the wilderness. A cabin of cedar logs with a mesquite brush lean-to was erected first, followed by slab and brush sheds and a corral. They planted a row of osage-orange and cottonwood trees to break the wind, and started several rows of grape vines. During the searing heat of summer, Elizibeth and Pernetta carried water a bucket-full at a time to keep the vines and saplings alive. The smaller children were kept busy driving away the long eared jack-rabbits which came from miles around to eat the tender green plants. Joseph ploughed the dry, sandy ground to plant cotton, melons and corn.

They soon learned that the Indian problems they had suffered at Heber Valley had followed them to the Muddy. In only one night

during a well planned raid, 60 horses were stolen from settlers all along the Muddy. Ploughed fields with badly needed crops were trampled or burned. One settler sent a letter to Brigham Young asking that they be allowed to leave their mission, but Brigham only counselled them to band together for protection, and to build a fort if they believed one was needed.

More and more miners were hurrying to the diggings at Panaca, making their camps at every little spring or desert seep. Water holes needed by the settlers were claimed by the miners or were fouled by their mining operations. Nor did the miners try to live with the Indians as the settlers tried to do, but instead burned their lodges and killed their horses and game animals. Most Indians couldn't distinguish between a miner and a Mormon, all they knew was that the intruders were taking their land and water, so they attacked both at every opportunity. Coquep, a renegade Indian was captured and hung, and in retribution a miner was ambushed and killed near the Panaca Mine. Angry miners ran down five Indians who knew nothing of the murdered miner, but still the miners killed all five of them. The Indian troubles caused by the miners only added to the settlers other problems.

In 1868 a new settlement called West Point was started 25 miles upstream from St. Thomas, but it never grew as hoped, for the same reasons the other villages were failing. Their future seemed to become more bleak with every passing day, with more settlers either choosing to leave or finding their final rest in the little cemetery on the hillside. Everyone labored long and hard, but some were not

as strong as others, and wilted like the delicate sego lily under the scorching desert sun. Others died of disease, while some men couldn't stand to see their families suffer so, and returned to the homes they had left behind. And few could blame them, for of the 158 families called to the Muddy with Joseph, only 30 remained at the end of the first year! ⁽⁷⁾

In June, when summer heat began taking its toll again, Joseph's neighbor James Davidson with his wife and 12 year old son left to go to St. George for supplies and to attend to temple work there. While crossing the desolate Beaver Dam Wash a wheel on their wagon broke. The heat was overbearing, but Davidson was determined not to leave his wife in that awful place. He put his son on one of the horses from their team and started him across a 60 mile desert wasteland to a crossing of the deceitfully misnamed Beaver Dam Wash where he had heard there was a well being dug. Three days later men working in the dry wash saw a riderless horse approaching and followed its back trail to where they found young Davidson's body along the trail, where he had died of thirst. Following his trail they found Davidson and his wife, both dead. Like so many others they were buried in nameless graves where they fell. ⁽⁸⁾ Not only had they been neighbors at the Muddy, they had also been old friends from Heber City, so their loss was especially heart-rending to the Murdocks as well as an omen of just how precarious their own situation was.

Joseph and Elizibeth also made the dangerous journey to St. George to do temple work there. Something strange happened at the temple which even Joseph couldn't explain, best told directly from

his journal. "We did work for our near relatives and were baptized for them, and received endowments for all we thought of and had made up to start back in the morning. I was the last to dress and came out of the dressing room by the baptismal chamber. There I saw three ladies standing side by side, all dressed in white like three angels. One of them spoke to me and said, We are three of your aunts who you have missed in your work. I did not know them, for my aunts had died long before I could have known them, but I was satisfied they had not lied to me. I had all the papers for my uncles and aunts and I took them to Elizibeth and said we had missed three of my aunts. I think not, she said, but we studied the papers and soon found the names of three aunts we had missed. We returned and had their work done. I bear testimony that I saw my three aunts with my natural eyes and heard their voices with my own ears." (9)

Was Joseph's vision of his three aunts a miracle? He only wrote of what he saw, without further elaboration. When their work was completed at St. George they returned to the Muddy, where on October 1st, 1868 Elizibeth gave birth to a boy they named Nelson. It was a difficult time and place to raise a small baby.

In 1861, 1862, 1866 and again in 1868 Congress cut slices from the western portion of Utah Territory, giving the land taken to Nevada. The removal of land in 1866 cut the Muddy Creek drainage from Utah, but no accurate surveys were made at that time, so the settlers there still believed their settlements were in Utah. As late as 1869 the Utah Territorial Legislature apparently also believed the settlements were in Utah, for it created Rio Virgin County out of

western Washington County. The new county included all of the Muddy Creek drainage and the settlements there. For several years Nevada tax collectors had tried to collect taxes at the Muddy settlements, but they were ignored, the settlers paying their taxes to Utah collectors. In 1869 Nevada officials demanded that the back taxes be paid, and in gold, not in produce as the settlers had been accustomed to paying. The Nevada taxes were five times higher than Utah taxes were, but they might just as well have been a hundred times higher, for none of the Saints had so much as a single gold coin to pay the collector.

Once again letters were sent to Brigham Young, advising him of the Nevada tax problems and the impossibility of ever building self sustaining communities along the Muddy. They also reminded him of the hardships there and of the deaths which had occurred, and told him that it was almost certain that they were in Nevada, not in Utah. But while awaiting a reply they still had to exist. The summer of 1869 proved to be the worst yet for the settlers. Searing desert winds burned their crops black before they even had a chance to get rooted, and what little did grow was consumed by hordes of grasshoppers. Pernetta searched along the rocky hillsides for sego roots while Elizibeth had to grind moldy grain to make bran for their mush. At that time something happened which seemed almost like a miracle.

"Elizibeth Murdock tried hard to feed her family, but one night as she mixed coarse bran bread she couldn't help the tears which fell into her mixing pan. She stepped outside and prayed that they might get some white flour so she could provide better food for her family.

Late that night, at about 3 o'clock in the morning a wagon stopped at their cabin and a man came to the door and said that because of the terrible heat he was traveling by night, and asked if he might buy some hay and grain for his horses. Joseph Murdock said to him, It appears that you are loaded pretty heavy for these sandy roads, what are you hauling? The traveler answered, white flour, and you can have all that you want for what it cost me, for it is too heavy to haul all the way to California. Joseph was able to trade for several sacks and the next morning Elizibeth made real biscuits for all of her family and neighbors. She said that her prayers had been answered!"⁽¹⁰⁾ Alva later said that until then he never knew there was such a thing as white bread!

It was a hard time for Pernetta also, for she gave birth to her third child on September 13th, 1869, a baby boy she named Alma Albert. Perhaps Alma sounded too much like Alva, but for whatever the reason, the new baby was always called Ab. Born in Indian country and raised like an Indian, he grew up half wild. In later years he would prove to be a sore trial for Joseph.

The winter of 1869-70 came early and temperatures fell to below zero for weeks at a time. Christmas brought little joy, for there were no gifts to be exchanged and hardly anything to eat. Starvation seemed to be a real threat, but their faith and pioneer courage kept them going, as Elizibeth later recalled for Paul Murdock. "Joseph remembered where a deer had been killed several months earlier and he went to that place and searched in the snow until he uncovered the hide. He took it home, singed the hair from it and cut the hide

into inch wide strips, which were then cut into small pieces. Pernetta boiled their empty flour sack to make a thin broth and then added the pieces of hide. Elizibeth set their poor table with the best dishes she had and filled a large serving bowl with the "glue soup" made from deer hide. Neighbors who had even less than they had were invited in for Christmas dinner. Joseph blessed their food and gave thanks to God, saying how lucky they were to have such a fine meal when there were others who had nothing for Christmas." Of such hardy stuff were the Utah pioneers made!⁽¹¹⁾

During that winter an official survey was started to determine exactly where the Utah-Nevada border was located. Meanwhile Brigham Young became alarmed at the great number of settlers who had fled the Muddy, and the stories of suffering and hardship they had endured there. In March, 1870 he decided to see conditions there himself, and made the long trip to visit the Muddy settlements. He was terribly disappointed at what he found, and tears came to his eyes when he saw the ragged, barefoot children and tired, worn looking women. He then realized that the Muddy was not what he had been told it was, and he said, "No one but a Mormon or an Indian could make a living in this desolate place!"⁽¹²⁾

Young returned to St. George where he conferred with counsellors and then returned to Salt Lake City to ponder a decision of what to do about the ill-planned mission. On September 17th, 1870 the Muddy settlers received a letter from Erastus Snow, President of the Southern Utah Mission, telling them they were free to leave if they so chose. Snow gave no reason for the decision other than that the

mission was not self sustaining and required a constant replacement of new settlers for those who became discouraged and left. A few families decided to leave, but for Joseph and the other stalwarts who had been sent there by Brigham, it was not enough to leave the decision to them. Brigham had sent them, and only he could release them.

The territorial border survey was soon completed, showing beyond doubt that the Muddy settlements were in Nevada, and that taxes would have to be paid to that state, and in gold coin. An urgent message dated December 14th, 1870 was brought from Brigham Young, warning the settlers that a Nevada sheriff had been ordered to attach all of their property for back taxes, livestock, wagons and anything else that was of value. Brigham advised them to abandon the mission as quickly as possible, telling them they had fulfilled their duty there, but still leaving the final decision to them. All of the settlers from along the Muddy were called together, and on December 20th a vote was taken on whether or not to leave. The vote was near unanimous, the decision to abandon the Muddy Mission had been made. Joseph felt that he could leave, content in the knowledge that he had done his best, and had stayed until Brigham had told him he could leave.

Preparations were made, wagons were outfitted and teams made up of the few gaunt animals they still owned. There was little to take, for clothing and household goods had long since worn out or had been discarded. They had barely enough food to get them to St. George. Marvel Murdock remembered being told that her family had killed their last tough old bull when the message came allowing them to leave.

She also recalled that the children sang a song which told, "Of sego roots and glue soup, we've had enough to eat, and we'de like to change our diet, to buckwheat cakes and meat!"(13)

All of the settlers left as a body in one company, leaving three long years of the hardest kind of work behind them. Everything that couldn't be taken was abandoned. Joseph left his house and fields while Elizibeth and Pernetta gave up their little orchard and vineyard they had labored so hard carrying water to, just as they were becoming mature enough to bear fruit. No one received so much as a penny for what was left behind, for there was no one who would buy property on the Muddy. They simply closed their doors, turned their backs and walked away.

Joseph's worn out oxen were hard pressed to pull his heavy wagons through the deep sand, and he dreaded the thought of crossing the barren Beaver Dam Wash country where his friend James Davidson with his wife and son had died of thirst. Alva, though only a boy of 13 drove one of the heavy wagons all the way from the Muddy back to the family home at Heber Valley. In later life he often credited that long, wearisome trip with being the start of his interest in freighting, which would become a major part of his lives work. As the last ridge beyond the Muddy was crossed, they stopped to look back for one last time, and all except one was shocked to see their tiny cabin and brush sheds going up in smoke. But Alva wasn't surprised, for he readily admitted he had set the fire, and with head held high he said, "I want to go someplace where there are schools and where my mother won't have to work so hard. We're never going back there!"(14)

The wagon train made its way across the Beaver Dam Wash and through the rugged Virgin River gorge to St. George, where Joseph and his family parted company with most of the other settlers. Brigham Young had offered all of them new land in southern Utah and most had decided to start over again near the new settlement of Glendale. But Joseph still had his home and part of his family at Heber Valley, so he began the slow, hard journey back to northern Utah in the dead of winter. With his wagons falling apart from years of hard use, and pulled by teams gaunt and thin, it would prove to be a difficult trip, but their hearts were light and their spirits high, for they were going home!

Footnotes - Chapter 10

1. Deseret News, April 14th, 1869
2. The Mormons In Nevada, Pg 40, Arrington, Las Vegas Sun, 1979
3. Deseret News, April 14th, 1869
4. The Mormons In Nevada, Pg 40, Arrington, Las Vegas Sun, 1979
5. Annals Of The Southern Utah Mission, Pg 58, Bleak
6. Journal JSM
7. Annals Of The Southern Utah Mission, Pg 384-87, Bleak
8. Utah Historical Quarterly, Vol 35, #2, Pg 167
9. Journal JSM
10. 100 Years On The Muddy, Pg 58, Arabel Hafner, Art City Publishing Co., 1967
11. Interview with Paul Murdock, April 20th, 1972
12. The Mormons In Nevada, Pg 43, Arrington, Las Vegas Sun, 1979
13. Interview with Marvel Murdock, March 1st, 1972
14. 100 Years On The Muddy, Pg 59, Arabel Hafner, Art City Pub, 1967